

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-3

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Senate Attempts to Improve SALT Could Be Troublesome

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Administration officials concerned with gaining Senate ratification of a strategic arms limitation agreement with the Soviet Union draw comfort from the awesomeness of the issue.

How many senators could there be, they ask, who would vote to end the process of negotiating limits on the balance of terror?

There is growing concern in the administration, however, about another category of senators: those who say they not only want SALT to continue, they want to make it better.

It is these senators who will contribute to what may be the most difficult part of the fight over SALT II. That will be over amendments, reservations and other attempts to influence what the treaty does.

President Carter has said he will not accept substantial amendments because they would prompt the Russians to reject the treaty they negotiated with his administration.

"Some senators have a feeling Carter is going to yield," says one knowledgeable and concerned administration official. "I don't see how he can."

THE OFFICIAL goes on to say that "more than anything, we're worried we won't be able to convey the danger of amendments."

This is not to say there will be no reservations or understandings acceptable to the administration. These would, by and large, affect only the United States. Officials suggest that an amendment such as that already offered by Sen. Gary Hart, D-Colo., is an example.

Some SALT II skeptics had feared that provisions in a protocol that will accompany the SALT II treaty would establish a precedent that would hamper future negotiations. Hart's amendment would simply tell negotiators they had to start from scratch as if the

protocol wasn't there, and get Congress' approval in addition.

An official suggests that another example might be an amendment being considered by Sen. William V. Roth, R-Del., dealing with a portion of the treaty designed to prevent circumvention of its provisions using third countries. The issue really concerns passing on information about advanced U.S. technology for bomb-tipped jet drones called cruise missiles.

ROTH IS SAID to be interested in making clear that all parties understand that the treaty does not deal with information transfer.

An amendment on a mobile or transportable missile system might fall in the acceptable category, and there are indications that it would have support from some elements on both sides of the SALT II treaty.

The United States maintains that a mobile system is permitted by the treaty after 1981. The Soviet Union says it is barred for the life of the treaty. An amendment could state the U.S. position.

There are a number of areas, however, in which the administration is bracing for a fight. One concerns the so-called equality issue. It centers on the heaviest missile in the Soviet strategic arsenal, the SS-18 with its 10 huge hydrogen bomb warheads.

The issue had its beginnings in 1972 when Congress approved an interim agreement on offensive arms as part of SALT I. That agreement gave the Soviet Union an edge in numbers of weapons that, the reasoning at the time went, was offset by the technological superiority of U.S. weapons.

SEN. HENRY JACKSON, D-Wash., succeeded in amending the agreement to request the executive branch to negotiate on the "principle of equality" in the future.

The Carter administration maintains it has. The treaty limits each side to equal numbers of weapons. In addition, the administration says it has made important strides in limiting Soviet land-based missiles of which the SS-18 is the most dangerous example.

Jackson and other senators are expected to dispute the claim of equality. The United States, which has not sought to build any heavy missiles, is denied the right to build them under SALT II, which lasts until 1985. The Soviet Union is permitted in excess of 300 of the heavy missiles that it has deployed.

SALT critics such as Paul H. Nitze say these monster missiles present a serious threat to nuclear stability. They also maintain that while there would not be time to deploy a U.S. heavy missile before the expiration of the treaty even if it were permitted, the capability is necessary.

WITHOUT IT, goes this reasoning, there is no incentive for the Soviet Union to reduce its own heavy missile force in future negotiations.

Amendments are likely that will either insist on U.S. freedom to build heavy missiles or insist on Soviet abandonment of theirs, the unlikely of prospects.

Amendments also are likely to deal with the ability of the United States to independently determine whether the Soviet Union is cheating on the treaty. This is the "verification" issue.

Amendments likely would attempt to prevent the Soviet Union from putting any of its missile test data in a code that the United States can't read.

The Soviet Union says it will not encrypt anything needed to verify SALT, but maintains that any other claim to missile test data is espionage. SALT critics say the Russians can't be trusted not to hide needed information if any information is in code.